

Powder Point Bridge

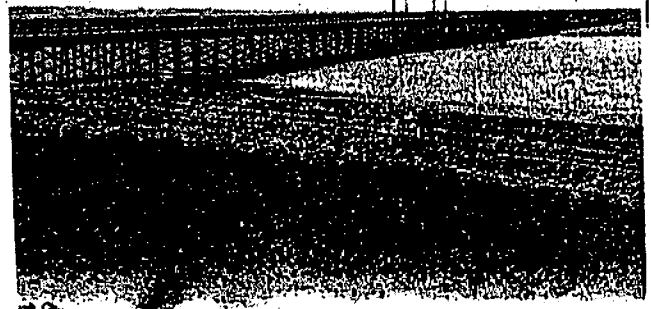
By THE REV. CANON ROBERT E. MERRY

The wood plank and piling bridge connecting Powder Point to Duxbury Beach, sometimes known as "Gurnet Bridge" but more often as "Powder Point Bridge," first took shape in the mind and imagination of William J. Wright. Mr. Wright the first non-Duxburyite to move into town had made a fortune reportedly in stocks and land speculation and had built an estate complete with horse stables and a race track (on the present site of the Duxbury High School football field) around the mid-1800s. He and his wife, Georgianna, were later to donate first their guest house for a town library [used for many years as the town offices], then in 1905 the beautiful brick and stone one we know so well.

Mr. Wright had bought Duxbury Beach with the blessing of Town Meeting and had divided it up into 263 house lots. The resolution of that town meeting held on April 20, 1888, reads: "That the people of Duxbury regard with satisfaction the efforts of William J. Wright to utilize Duxbury Beach by offering for sale 263 building lots and erecting private houses there. And we would therefore request the selectmen to expend the amount of money upon [necessary]...roadmaking and otherwise as their judgment seem best." The vote for the bridge was close [65 to 45] and as is often expected in our muddling democratic ways an effort was made at a special Town Meeting on April 17, 1890 to rescind the action. The bridge was built in 1892 and dedicated in 1895.

Bridges had not been welcomed along our seacoast estuaries; they were viewed with at best mixed emotions as obstacles to navigation. And as everyone knows who has tried to put up a simple boat pier in Duxbury, it is next to impossible to get permission to do so. So jealous are we of the navigability of our tidal waters and ocean inlets. A case in point is the recent effort of the town of Chatham on the Cape, whose wooden drawbridge had not been used for some years who petitioned the Commonwealth to omit it in a general overhaul of the bridge and was refused there and also in a court trial. Rights of watercraft had to be secured for the future. In Colonial Times as we can understand, water was the most practical form of transportation. This could be construed from original parceling out of grants under the royal charter. Two criteria were used: 1) land in sufficient quantity to support subsistent farming for a family and 2) free access to tidal waters. Duxbury was especially favored not only in its numerous creeks leading from the bay to back land in North and West Duxbury, but also in its many ponds and fresh water streams, all of which lent themselves to ease of transportation and portage and required every family of necessity to become skilled boat builders. (I herewith acknowledge much help for this information from Mrs. Dorothy Wentworth and her excellent book "The Settlement and Growth of Duxbury"). As colonial times gave way to more prosperous days--in the early 1800's for example--this boat building skill led naturally and inevitably to the great ship-building years of mid-century of which Duxbury is justly proud.

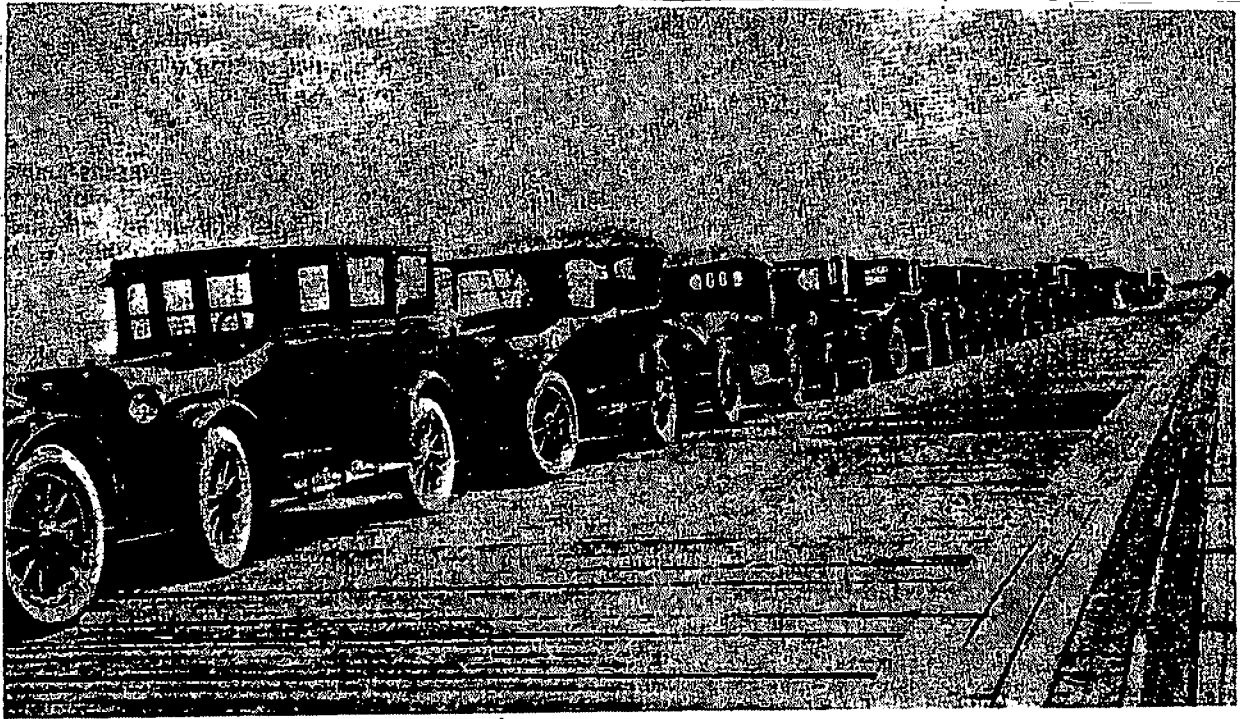
So boat-building and water transportation were inimical to bridge-building. This helps explain why the first bridge in Duxbury (over Blue Fish River) was not erected until 1803. It was built of wooden planks and cross beams and stood on piles and boasted a drawbridge to allow passage for the hulls of ships built upstream on their journey to completion in the ways of Ezra Weston off Powder Point. This bridge was replaced by a stone one in 1881 complete with floodgates to hold water in and omitted the draw. Records are sparse, but it is believed the next bridge in current use was built over Eagle's Nest Creek near the first Duxbury boat yard, Bartletts, in 1872. Town reports show several bridge repair items on Harrison and Surplus and other streets, all of which have now become culverts and are maintained by the



Powder Point Bridge, Duxbury, Mass.

highway department as part of our town road system.

It is easy for us to understand opposition to bridge-building when we are reminded that the Boston Packet boat in full sail chartered for the occasion with its hundred or so Congressional dignitaries moved right up to Duck Hill to be met by stage coaches and driven to Marshfield for Daniel Webster's funeral in 1852, or even as late as 1912 schooners laden with rum and molasses and other Caribbean cargo sailed up to Crab Island in Millbrook to Ford's Store. This freedom of movement and access to the water also may help explain why Duxbury delayed so long (32 years) in letting the Old Colony railroad through. Boats moved regularly from Plymouth and Duxbury to Boston stopping at Clark's Island for mail placed in the apple tree there, and stage coaches met the trains at Kingston. What need did Duxbury have for a railroad?



Mr. Wright's plan to develop Duxbury Beach received 2 successive knockout blows in the blizzards of 1888 and 1889. The first is remembered for dumping several feet of snow in Boston and New York and sinking the steamer Portland with all hands. The blizzard of 1889 was far more severe but left less snow and did not get the dramatic news coverage of that of 1888. These 2 storms washed away so many sand dunes from the beach that it was felt house building was impractical and so except for the 3 houses already standing a third to half mile down the beach and later towed by tugboat to Landing Road, where they still stand, the entire project was abandoned.

Whether it was Wright's pride in the future prospects of his newly adopted town, the perversity of human nature or the general expansionist spirit of the times (we recall the completion of the trans-continental railroad in 1846, the laying of the trans-Atlantic cable in 1869 and the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883), the imagination of the townspeople had been fired up and house-building or no house-building, his offer to pay a third of the cost of construction was accepted and the Bridge was under way.

The total cost of the Bridge in round figures was \$30,000. A third was donated by Wright, a third by the town and the other third by adjacent towns in Plymouth County, including Plymouth itself. The original act of the legislature in 1887 included the condition that the Town of Duxbury would be responsible for maintenance, but this was almost immediately changed and maintenance became the task of the County, with a third paid by Duxbury, a third by Plymouth County and the remaining divided up between the towns of Plymouth, Kingston, Marshfield and Pembroke, pro-rated according to use. At one point costs were divided as follows: 1/3 from Duxbury, 1/6 from the town of Plymouth, 1/9 from Kingston and 1/8 from Marshfield. In the early days maintenance costs were minimal, but later they increased substantially; for example a total of \$112,971.82 was expended for repairs on the bridge in the 20-year period from 1918-1937.

This arrangement was to last for the next several years with mixed satisfaction. An unavoidable tug-

Duxbury Clipper

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o'-war often surfaced in the division of costs and more often than not the condition of the bridge suffered. Extensive damage was suffered by the bridge in the long period of sub-zero weather (when it was possible for a few days to drive a horse and sleigh from Standish Shore to Clark's Island) in the winter of 1918 and the town meeting the following spring seriously considered abandoning the bridge altogether. Was it really that beneficial to the town's taxpayers? Many thought otherwise.

Oldtimers in Duxbury remember well that winter of 1918 when the bridge took the form of a gigantic corkscrew. Ralph Blakeman remembers the old drawbridge with its hand windlass and chain link hoists and jutting piers for boats to tie up while the draw was raised. I remember well diving off the railing and pier on a hot summer Sunday afternoon. I remember well, too, dare-devil divers (among whom Eben Briggs was one!) who would climb to the top of the posts and dive from there. My most vivid recollection of summer Sunday afternoons and Powder Point Bridge is racing down the bridge grinding away at the siren with Ed Baker at the wheel of No. 1 Brockway fire engine and squeezing our way with cars parked the length of the bridge and in the face of oncoming traffic to douse a fire in the Bridge's substructure.

Alpheus Walker, who with 2 other men did the first major renewal job from 1934 to 1938 working for the County, recalls that all their hard pine lumber was shipped from the Carolinas to Boston by boat. He reports with real pride that in all those 4 years of rebuilding, the bridge was closed to traffic only once and that for a mere 15 minutes. This task of reconstruction included jetting 400 new pilings and the replacing of all crossbeams with new lumber.

On July 21, 1939, the diverse responsibility for maintaining Powder Point Bridge was abandoned by act of legislature and became the sole duty of Duxbury. The act stipulated that as of a year and a half from that date, namely, on Jan. 1, 1941, to quote the act: "Powder Point (or Gurnet) Bridge become the exclusive property and responsibility of the town of Duxbury" ...with "full 'town way' rights all the way to Gurnet." Two restrictions were applied: 1) The vehicular speed on the bridge was limited to 12 miles per hour and the weight limited to 4 tons.

The bridge continued its accustomed use from 1941-1956 with minor repairs as needed. But in this latter year with information that the bridge was deteriorating to a point beyond which safety for pedestrians and vehicles could not be guaranteed, the selectmen again ordered an engineering survey. When a section of the bridge was destroyed by fire in 1961, an appropriation of \$25,000 was made for essential repairs. Nine years later when an alarm was sounded, the selectmen asked the Duxbury Fire Department to make a full study of the bridge and give a report. This report recommended an immediate closing of the bridge to all traffic, including pedestrians. With the entire electorate of Duxbury aroused by the threat of the loss of the bridge again, urgent special town meetings were held in 1972, 1973 and 1974. At this last meeting it was voted to take on the capital expenditure necessary (initially \$225,000) and a special town meeting in March, 1975, ordered the complete repair and renewal of the bridge. For several months the bridge was closed while the work went on with the usual problems associated with such enterprises and in 1978 it was opened for use and has remained so ever since. (I am indebted to Mrs. Ruth Rowley for facts and figures of this last paragraph).

The bridge is now in A-1 shape under the eagle eye of Paul Brogna, our certified civil engineer superintendent of streets. Paul sees to it that repairs are made promptly when any disintegration sets in so that no major expenditure of capital funds will be necessary in the foreseeable future. The last repairs on the bridge were made in April of the current year, all done by our own Highway Department at great savings to the taxpayers of Duxbury. The East end apron of the Bridge was completely rebuilt and filled in. Those of us who use the bridge regularly are aware of the work this requires, and are grateful for the privilege. I believe the present status and condition of the bridge is the best it has ever been. It is our bridge, and we are taking care of it, and its use is guaranteed in the foreseeable future barring earthquakes, fire, or 20 below zero ice storms.

Now when Duxbury citizens entertain out-of-town guests by showing them Duxbury's great historic spots--Captain's Hill and monument, John Alden House, the Old Burial Ground and King Caesar House to mention a few--I hope they will drive down to the beach and as they rumble over Powder Point Bridge, I hope they will drive slowly, not because the police cruiser is listening on the far end and will snag you if you exceed the 12-mile per hour limit, nor because a greater speed will loosen the stringers and beams and pilings, but because it represents such a long and difficult human undertaking and deserves a central place in Duxbury institutions.